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SUBJECT: MEXICO-IRAN RELATIONS: A LOT OF TALK BUT NOT MUCH ACTION

Classified By: Political Counselor Charles V. Barclay for reasons 1.4 (b)(d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) More than a year after a dynamic new Iranian Ambassador hit the ground running in Mexico, bilateral relations between the two countries have yet to move beyond the symbolic. Economic ties remain limited and soft-power projections by Iran in Mexico have had little public impact. Mexican officials pay a certain amount of lip service to expanding cooperation with Iran, but circumstances offer little fertile ground for doing so. Moreover, the provocative stance taken by the new envoy has caused some Mexican officials to take notice and may have alienated some in Mexico's small Muslim community.

COOPERATION LIMITED MOSTLY TO SYMBOLIC AGREEMENTS

¶2. (U) Ambassador Mohammad Hassan Ghadiri Abyaneh arrived in Mexico in July 2007 and has been making waves since. In interviews and public statements, he freely shares his opinions and ignites controversy by discussing, among other things, a possible US invasion of Iran, US domination of Latin America, and Iran's nuclear program. He is actively working to increase Iran's presence in Mexico for political and religious ends, attempting to build Mexican support for Iran in the international arena and to exert control over Mexico's small Muslim community. He is trying to convince GOM to make it easier for Iranians to obtain visas for travel to Mexico, a change that would allow him to attempt to increase Iran's cultural, religious, and political influence in Mexico on a greater scale.

¶3. (U) In January 2008, the Ambassador orchestrated a visit to Mexico by Ali Reza Sheikh Attar, the Iranian Foreign Minister's First Deputy, who discussed bilateral economic cooperation with a variety of executive and legislative branch officials. While here, the Deputy Foreign Minister said that enhancing ties to Latin America is a foreign policy priority for Iran. Such ties stand to serve Iran politically by increasing international support for its government and its policies as well as religiously by allowing Iran to exercise influence over Latin America's Muslim communities. According to press reporting, the Iranian president instructed Tehran's Latin American ambassadors last month to present Iran's potential cooperation to Latin American governments and to emphasize that Iran is opposed to the

"domination" imposed by the "empire" (the United States). Iran has already established close ties with Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua.

¶4. (U) Despite some encouraging noises from Mexican officials, however, the country offers little fertile ground for significantly expanded ties. Concrete economic cooperation between Mexico and Iran is quite limited. The two governments have made several symbolic pledges to hold meetings and focus on increasing economic cooperation and trade -- which stands just below \$40 million, three fourths of which is Mexican exports to Iran. The most specific proposal involves sharing information about the Iranian experience of opening its oil sector to private investment -- an issue of great interest to Mexico as discussion of energy reform gets underway.

¶5. (U) Deputy Minister Sheikh Attar's Mexican interlocutors ventured that energy cooperation might be a possibly fruitful area. Deputy Foreign Minister Lourdes Aranda said that the GOM would be willing to learn about Iran's experience of allowing private investment in its oil sector. Likewise, Chamber of Deputies President Ruth Zavaleta described Iranian-Mexican cooperation as very important and called for drawing on Iran's experience in energy as Mexico attempts to address the issues facing Pemex, Mexico's state-owned oil company.

¶6. (U) However, there has been no indication that the GOM seriously intends to plumb Iranian expertise as a model for its own halting efforts to reform the energy sector here. Mexican officials are more interested in learning from the successful experiences of Brazil and the Nordic countries as they seek to find a politically acceptable reform package.

¶7. (U) Apart from economic issues, Mexican officials have said the cultural arena offers possibilities for expanding ties with Iran. These gestures are mostly symbolic and are backed by limited substance. In her January meeting with Ali Reza Sheikh Attar, Deputy FM Aranda stressed cooperation between the two countries in the field of culture and history and called the 2007 display of Persian artifacts at Mexico's National Anthropology Museum a successful experience in cultural cooperation. Additionally, Luis Ortiz Monasterio Castellanos, Mexico's Ambassador to Iran, told the Iranian Foreign Minister that Mexico's great fondness for Iranian culture and art is an asset for strengthening bilateral ties. Such soft cooperation is not new; cultural exchanges also took place under President Fox. However, Mexican appetites for such exotica are growing only slowly and there is little evidence of keen appreciation among the public for a steady diet of Farsi films and artifacts that would soften the turf for its closer identification with Iranian political and diplomatic interests.

CALDERON'S STANCE TOWARD IRAN

¶8. (U) Calderon too has made occasionally positive-sounding, but largely empty, gestures toward Iran. In December 2007, he met former Iranian President Mohamed Khatami and agreed with the latter (who made a thinly veiled assessment of the U.S.-Iran face off) that dialogue and negotiation were the way to deal with differences between countries. Last year, while receiving Ambassador Ghadiri Abyeneh's credentials, he noted his interest in expanding relations and said Mexico was ready to promote ties with a variety of regional and international actors.

¶9. (U) However, unlike Venezuela's Chavez and Nicaragua's Ortega, who have offered truly warm welcomes to Iranian overtures, it is obvious that Calderon is not inclined to actively pursue the relationship. His pragmatic approach to foreign policy issues and desire to focus on Mexico's relationships with Latin American, the United States, and other important economic players will keep Iran from the top of the list of countries his administration actively courts

in an effort to enhance ties.

IRAN PLAYS TO MEXICO'S SENSITIVITIES

¶10. (U) Mexico's longstanding foreign policy mantras -- "sovereignty and self-determinism" -- offer Iran its most useful leverage here. Iranian officials understand Mexico's cold-war era non-alignment fundamentals and its sensitivities surrounding living in the shadow of the United States. They play to these in seeking better ties and concrete Mexican support for Iran's positions on issues such as its nuclear development program. In their public statements, Iranian officials have said pointedly that Iran trusts that Mexico's premium on autonomy and even-handedness in its foreign relations will permit expanded bilateral projects with Iran -- notwithstanding its close relationship with the United States. (Comment: Post's contacts with SRE on Iran, in particular, have been colored by that institution's traditional diplomatic defaults. SRE has typically demonstrated little concern with Iran's push to shore up ties in the region and its nuclear ambitions. End Comment.)

¶11. (U) Ambassador Ghadiri Abyaneh is especially adept at playing to Mexico's sensitivities and framing issues involving Iran -- no matter how fanciful -- in ways that make GOM support for Iran seem natural. In a December interview with La Jornada, he said he was confident Mexico would support Iran's right to develop a nuclear program with peaceful ends. He also said calling Latin America the United States' backyard was an insult to the region, adding that Iran is waiting for the day when Latin America will break free and discover the falsehood of the "American dream." He insisted that Latin America is underdeveloped and its people are forced to emigrate because of a history of US dominance in the region. Finally, Ghadiri Abyaneh said that because Mexico spoke out against US intervention in Iraq, he expects that Mexico will maintain that commitment to non-intervention in the future, noting that silence on the part of other countries in the face of a US attack on Iran would amount to

participating in the war.

ISRAEL'S INTEREST IN CONTAINING IRANIAN INFLUENCE

¶12. (C) Israel has an interest in Iranian influence in Latin America. A high-ranking Israeli official urged Mexican authorities in November to keep their eyes open and prevent Iranian citizens from penetrating Mexican territory, stressing that Iran is a strategic enemy of Israel that had committed terrorist attacks against Israeli centers and embassies in foreign nations.

¶13. (S) The Political Counselor met recently with the Israeli DCM to discuss Mexico-Iran relations. He said Israel believes CISEN, Mexico's intelligence service, has a handle on any security issues related to the increased Iranian presence in Mexico. He also said that the Israelis themselves are watching for the entrance of Iranians who could be coming to Mexico for questionable reasons. He said they have not yet seen evidence of any such activity but will continue to focus on it here and in the region. He noted his government's concerns that Iran's attempt to increase its influence in Latin America, if successful, could provide a beachhead or network for future activities against Israeli interests.

¶14. (S) While he signaled concerns with Iran's intentions and the energy being put into furthering them by its Ambassador here, the Israeli DCM also said Ghadiri Abyaneh may have been too bold in his public posture and activities. He has drawn the attention of Mexican officials, both within SRE and CISEN and may also have alienated at least some members of Mexico's small Muslim community, who shy away from associating with him out of fear that his presence and activities will do more harm than good. (Comment: We too have been told by officials at both organizations that they are

monitoring the Ambassador's activities carefully. End
Comment.)

COMMENT

¶115. (C) We suspect that much as it would like to cultivate Mexico as part of a regional strategy, Tehran probably recognizes that even its ambitious and energetic Ambassador faces an uphill battle. Ghadiri Abyaneh is no doubt operating under the same set of marching orders given to all of Iran's envoys in Latin America. While he's made a bit of headway, the Mexican government and public remain focused elsewhere and not particularly receptive.

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